

Changing patterns in vocational entry qualifications: student support and outcomes in undergraduate degree programmes

Masardo Alexander, Shields Robin, *University of Bath, UK*

Outline

Reforms stemming from *The Browne Report* (2010) and the subsequent higher education White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011) introduce a series of changes that aim to make higher education institutions (HEIs) more responsive to student needs, largely by creating a competitive system in which students have access to information in order to make decisions about higher education and consequentially bear greater responsibility for its cost. While the White Paper includes specific commitments to students entering higher education with vocational qualifications, there are concerns that HEIs have not adequately supported students with vocational qualifications in the past (Ertl et al, 2008).

These policy commitments and existing concerns about student support both indicate an urgent need for systematic research on outcomes for students entering higher education with vocational qualifications in order to ensure that they are fairly supported in the changing environment. Developing this area of research is particularly pressing, as figures compiled by Pearson (2011) reveal a 30% year-on-year increase in the numbers of those attaining university places with BTEC-level qualifications.

This paper reports on initial findings from Higher Education Academy (HEA)-funded research that determines how well students with vocational qualifications are supported in the new higher education policy environment by analysing longitudinal data on attainment from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and in-depth qualitative work with student focus groups and academic staff interviews. The combined methods yield insight into both macroscopic trends and underlying explanatory factors.

The quantitative component of the study uses multilevel regression to analyse differences in degree outcomes by students' entry qualification, controlling for age, mode of study, discipline, institution-type and entry-tariff. These controls allow the investigation of complex interactions in the dataset; for example, do two students with equal entry tariffs but differing entry qualifications (vocational and academic) have the same chances of achieving a 2:1 degree result? Similarly, do students with vocational qualifications have an equal chance of completing their degree, taking into account that they are more likely to undertake part-time study (which has a lower completion rate)? Through controlling for multiple factors the researchers isolate and investigate the effect of vocational qualifications.

The analysis also takes into account differences by degree subjects – identifying subjects in which students with vocational qualifications have better outcomes. The multilevel aspect of the analysis controls for the clustering of data into institutions,

improving the validity of findings and allowing the researchers to examine whether groups of institutions (e.g. Russell Group, Million+) have differing outcomes for students with vocational qualifications. The longitudinal perspective – including data dating back to 2008, allow us to examine to what extent changes have occurred since policy changes in 2010.

The qualitative component analyses the needs and expectations of a sample of 24 students and 10 academic staff members in order to determine how students with vocational qualifications are supported. In focus group discussions, students discuss how they feel their previous study prepared them for higher education and how well they have been supported, while interviews with staff address how they feel students with differing entry qualifications are prepared for study in higher education.

This part of the study builds upon previous research (Hayward et al, 2008) by looking at how changes in the HE landscape (e.g. fees) influenced their higher education experience. Participants have been recruited from two Universities that share a geographic location, but differ in their focus (research versus teaching intensive), ensuring both pre- and post-1992 institutions are represented. Through this work, we aim to inspire and support effective practice in learning and teaching by identifying key challenges faced by students entering higher education with vocational qualifications, while influencing policy, future thinking and change by gathering evidence and conducting rigorous analysis to inform national policy.

Analysis for the study is ongoing, but when finished results will speak to current debates about how well increased competition is serving students with vocational qualifications. They will also provide a systematic, nation-wide overview of how students with vocational qualifications perform in higher education institutions, identifying attributes of institutions in which these students perform best. This will be complemented by in-depth data on educational experiences that can be used to inform future policy and practice.

References

Browne, J. et al. (2010), Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (the Browne Review). Available at: <http://www.independent.gov.uk/browne-report>. [Accessed on 02.01.14].

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011), *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*. TSO

Ertl, H., Hayward, G., Wright, S., Edwards, A., Lunt, I., Mills, D. and Yu. K. (2008) The student learning experience in higher education: Literature review report for the Higher Education Academy. York: HEA

Hayward, G. et al (2008), Degrees of Success: The Transition between VET and HE: Full Research Report, ESRC End of Award Report, RES-139-25-0238. Swindon: ESRC

Pearson (2011), The future of vocational education: The progression of BTEC students to higher education. Pearson Education Ltd 2014. Available at: <http://www.edexcel.com/btec/news-and-policy/future-vocational-education/Pages/he-progression.aspx>. Accessed on 02.01.14